

The art of medicine

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Out on the pitch: how does sport affect the mental health and wellbeing of LGBT people?

It has become commonplace to associate participation in sport and exercise with positive health, with the NHS even branding sport as a ‘miracle cure’. Such recommendations lean on empirical evidence that emphasises the benefits of physical activity on overall health – both physical and mental. These guidelines are well-meaning, but they rely on a view of sport that is shorn of cultural context, and does not account for how experiences of sport and exercise vary enormously for different groups within society.

This is especially the case for LGBT people. For this community, sport and the culture that surrounds it has historically been much more fraught than upbeat health recommendations would indicate. Sporting experiences can be particularly damaging to the mental health and wellbeing of LGBT people: for instance, the atmosphere at football matches can be virulently homophobic or heterosexist; memories of physical education at school can be traumatic and long-lasting; sporting spaces also tend to follow rigid, unyielding gender segregation. In contrast, when sport is positive for the mental health of LGBT individuals, it can be in ways that transcend the neurochemical, mood-boosting and mechanical benefits of exercise.

Oral history interviews are a method of capturing these life experiences, and adding nuance to the relationship between sport and health. When LGBT people are given a chance to articulate the role sport has played in their lives – both positively and negatively - the psychological and social consequences of physical activity may become more ambivalent, but may also illuminate what specifically it is about sport that *can* be of benefit. Oral history can also offer a different perspective on the consequences of ‘social prescribing’ (or ‘community referral’, the practice of referring patients to non-clinical services) and its potentially unforeseen side-effects on diverse communities.

One particularly powerful testimony was from Ben (interviewees are here identified only by forenames for privacy). Ben is in his late thirties, and only recently came out

as gay. He had never participated in group sport before, but was encouraged to join an LGBT Jujitsu club by a coming-out support group. This was despite the fact that Ben found much of the culture that surrounds sports participation – the rituals of changing rooms, the all-male environment- extremely intimidating, as it ignited repressed desires and stirred painful memories. He explained: ‘... I certainly didn’t want to play football, didn’t want to be getting changed in front of anybody in a bloke’s changing room... it was too difficult... you’re showering for the purpose of showering but actually it’s quite a, it’s a sexy thing to do.’ As his involvement in the club deepened, however, he overcame this mental barrier. Jujitsu itself gave Ben a sense of achievement and confidence: ‘I’m getting better at it, getting more confident. Once you get those basics right you’re away, once you know how to fall, if you’re being thrown you think it’s painful, it’s not painful, it’s actually great fun.’

Sport was important for Ben not only in the physical release of exercise, but also because it allowed him to confront many of his psychological danger zones in a safe environment. Joining the Jujitsu club literally allowed him to grapple with his desire for other men.

Ben could do this as he was able to tap into a large and growing network of LGBT sports clubs. These groups provide so much more to their members than simply access to exercise. Anna talked about joining a lesbian softball team in New York. Unlike Ben, Anna was comfortable with her sexuality, and had always been sporty, but her attempts to fit in with ‘ordinary’ teams had been frustrating. She spoke about joining a lesbian softball team not just in sporting terms, but also in terms of connecting with a community, allowing her to connect positively with a vibrant lesbian sub-culture. The experience transcended what one would expect of a simple sporting experience, changing how she viewed the roles gay people could play in society: ‘I’d been out for 5 years but I’d never had a community and this was, I mean, it was a revelation. It was lovely in all kinds of ways... I remember I was still a bit unsure about gay parents... I just remember saying, "Well, I’m not sure about that". And then it was great to be in this community where, of course, there were gay parents. I think it’s so powerful and that was, for me, I just feel a massive leap forward in my growth.’ Despite being comfortable with her sexuality, connecting with this sporting community spurred profound changes in Anna’s attitudes, her sense of

wellbeing and her ideas about what she, as a lesbian, could achieve and contribute to society.

Anna proceeded to find her partner in the club, and to join LGBT hockey and swimming teams. However, not all those deeply involved in sport are so fortunate. For those at elite level, sport and the culture surrounding it can harm self-esteem, lead to anxiety and negatively affect wellbeing.

Where for Ben the experience of sport facilitated his coming out of the closet, for J., a former professional athlete— sport had the opposite effect. For J., the protracted isolation of the closet caused deep harm, and contributed to excessive alcohol consumption. J.'s experience of a closeted sporting life was defined by loneliness. He recounted: 'I think there's an extreme isolation that comes with playing sports anyway... But normally you share that isolation with a partner, with numerous flings or with the family that you have alongside your team. But if you are a gay person in a team... then you could be more isolated from your team in some senses... And you can still feel that deep sense of loneliness that you can't share with almost anybody.'

Another recurring issue for LGBT people is the effect of the strict gender regime surrounding sporting culture. If the closet is a problem of loneliness caused by a lack of visibility, for other LGBT people being visible and attracting the wrong sort of visibility is particularly problematic.

Dan is a trans man and a college-level lacrosse player in the US. Dan explained how his choice of which sport to pursue as a child was driven by his attempt to flee gender expectations. The tennis club he played at did not accept his gender presentation as a tomboy, so he preferred playing lacrosse as it was a sport more accepting of his presentation as a masculine girl. He said: 'it was harder playing tennis presenting like that, because... especially on women's team, it's a very feminine sport, whereas lacrosse is very physical, very masculine...'

The choice between wearing shorts or being made to wear a skirt was certainly not a minor consideration for a young trans person, and these low-level expectations of gender conformity would escalate to crisis-point when Dan reached his teens. At the

age of 14, when Dan was still presenting as a woman and a lesbian before transitioning, Dan's parents sent him to a fundamentalist Christian conversion therapy camp. These camps attempt to change an individual's sexuality through psychological or spiritual interventions. At the camp, Dan's love of sport was a problem. He said: 'I remember them telling me over and over again... we're worried that if you continue with sport that you're going to... become attracted to one of the females on your team... they were like, go and play tennis with your mother but don't play with the team anymore, because it's too much temptation.' Sport here was used as a tool to impose gender conformity.

Conversion therapy is an extreme example, but Dan's experiences of how sport can be used as a mechanism to discipline gender presentation is not unusual. Graham is an American college-level tennis player who experienced gender conformity being used as a coaching tool. He said: '[My coach] went through a phase where he said, "Okay we have to man up, we have to be like men"... it was like okay we have to man up, and so we have got to hit the gym, we've got to get really, really strong physically, we've got to be very loud... it's just all of those things that I'm genuinely not, so that was hard.' Rather than motivating Graham, this attempt at using manliness as an ideal had the opposite effect, making an already shy person withdraw even more, and increasing his anxiety on and off the court. Graham reports that he is only now rebuilding his confidence as an out gay man. Although this experience might have been particularly affecting for a young gay man coming to terms with his sexuality, it is possible that many heterosexual athletes similarly recoil from such hyper-masculine, aggressive sporting atmospheres.

A social prescription of sport or exercise could thus provoke surprising results: it might give people like Ben an opportunity to grapple with their fears and desires, or allow people like Anna join a wider community and transform their ideas about what being LGBT means. However, the culture that surrounds sport can still prove harmful to LGBT people, particularly in the rigid gender segregation and expectations that pervade sport.

LGBT experience also indicates some of the limits of empirical studies that investigate the relationship between physical activity and health. Here, other

qualitative methods such as oral history have a role in revealing the more complicated relationship between the body and the mind over a lifetime. By listening to LGBT people talk about sport and mental health we learn something profound about how the intensely physical experience of sport can help us find the language to talk about the difficult and potentially dangerous topic of mental health.

Further Reading

- Cauldwell, Jayne, “Does your boyfriend know you're here?” The Spatiality of Homophobia in Men's Football Culture in the UK’, *Leisure Studies* 30 (2011), 123-38
- Montañola, Sandy and Aurélie Olivesi (eds.), *Gender Testing in Sport: Ethics, Cases and Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2016)
- Hemka, Gert, “As Long as They Don't Make an Issue of It ... ” Gay Men and Lesbians in Organized Sports in the Netherlands’, *Journal of Homosexuality* 35 (1998), 1-23
- Ravel, Barbara and Geneviève Rail, ‘From Straight to Gaie? Quebec Sportswomen's Discursive Constructions of Sexuality and Destabilization of the Linear Coming Out Process’, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 32 (2008), 4-23
- Spandler, H. and Roy A. Mckeown, M. ‘Playing by the Rules: Gender Relations in a Football and Mental Health Project’, *Journal of Men's Studies* 22 (2014), 140-54